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Mutazalism

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The doctrine of the Mutazilites or in other words the Mutazalism is a definite school of thought which was developed, propagated and adhered to by a number of tenacious Muslims who based their religious dogmas on definite lines which obtained more from philosophy and rational thought than to anything else. It is therefore asserted by their opponents, mostly the orthodox believers, that the Mutazilites were not true believers of Islam and certain staunch orthodox thinkers of Islam have come to this conclusion that they were Zindiqs or misguided ones. But on the other hand these Mutazilites who mostly flourished during the hegemony of the Abbasid rule particularly during the reign of al-Mamun (813-33 A.C.) treated all those who did not contribute to their way of thought to be on the wrong path - and it is a matter of great surprise that these Mutazilites, who were believed to be the apostles of freedom in thought and action for each and every Muslim, became so narrow minded, cribbed and confined in their ideology that they at one time, became the greatest opponents of freedom of every sort particularly the freedom of belief and faith. Al-Mamun himself was such a strong minded believer in the Mu'tazilah doctrine that he established a sort of tribunal or Mihnah to test the beliefs of all his state officials and nobody was considered to be eligible for any state-post unless he was a Mu'tazilah by faith. His successors Mu'tasim and Wathiq were still more strict in their treatment of those who did not prove to be of Mu'tazilah belief. Wathiq was so staunch a supporter of the doctrine that he once did not pay ransom-money for such Muslim prisoners of war who he did not subscribe to the Mu'tazilah belief

and he considered them to be unbelievers and therefore outside the pale of Islam. After giving so many historic facts to substantiate the position and claim of the Mutazilites let us now examine the question of the origin and development of the sect from its very inception.

It is pointed out that the seeds of insubordination are but natural in human beings and no sooner than Islam spread to far off lands that the foreign influences of considerable magnitude began to assert themselves on the plain canvas of this simple religion of a simple country Arabia. This chequered pattern of Islam is a direct result of the inter-action of different foreign forces which worked out a beautiful design like Mutazalism of Sufism in Islam. To my mind these trends appear to be quite foreign and alien to the very nature of an Arab or Semitic national and it is hardly that we find any good sponsor of the cause of these movements in Arabia. Like Sufism, Mutazalism also flourished on un-'Arab soil and it more appealed to an un-'Arab mind than to an Arab mind because an Arab is more or less a self contented person who relies unflinchingly on his fate or 'Muqaddar' and seldom grumbles at his lot. On the other hand an Iranian or to be more exact an Aryan is always more subjective and critical towards such questions and attitudes as what is the relation of a human being with his Creator, what are his own limitations or privileges and to what extent he is free to do a thing or not. The first theory which is of paramount importance under the Mu'tazilah system is about the Unity of God, His essence and qualities the attributes and self as it could be defined in words or contemplated in mind. Islam also supports and the Quran too that God is supreme, without a parallel, having no equal and all Powerful and Mighty (Quran, 112 / 1 - 4 and others). He created the universe of His own accord and the created & the Creator are two distinct classes which can never be mixed together. Here it is quite contrary to the sufistic idea that one day through self discipline and inner consciousness the created may become one with the Creator. This theory appears to be a loan from the Buddhist world where Nirwān means that the differences of the Creator and the creatures are nullified and the need of 'Janam' or birth in this world is done away with. But in Mutazalism the Creator and the created are so different from each other that the feelings of the latter are much inferior or so to say do not deserve any comparison with the ultimate finite and everlasting attributes of God. This point can further be illustrated by quoting concrete example: Human eye will not see God on the day of Judgement because it is incompetent to do so and once this body is destroyed it will not be

resurrected on the last day as this fact commonly believed by every Muslim who is an orthodox believer in the faith of Islam, because reasoning does not favor this attitude of resurrection of body in toto.

The key-stone of the Mutazilah doctrine was the theory of the creation of the Quran and unlike the Orthodox people they believed it to be Hadith that is which may not be eternal while the Orthodox people considered it to be as sacred and holy as the very essence of the God-head Itself; and it was their firm belief that from the very beginning the Quran co-existed with God Almighty Himself. The Mutazilites rejected this theory on the ground that if they believed in it it will mean that there is another sacred being also besides God and this will lead to Dualism which according to Nazzam a renowned thinker of Mutazilites, would amount to blasphemy and is unpardonable. The Mutazilites called themselves to be the partisans of Justice and Unity (Ahl al-'Adl wa al-Tauhid) and therefore they were duty-bound to protect such beliefs which led to this ideology of mere and reject and at the same time turn down any other theory which may be contrary to this.

The main belief of the Mu'tazilah was that Allah is Qadim (قديم). He is also Âlim (عالم), Qâdir (قادر), Hayy (حي). His qualities of being all pervading and all powerful have been too much emphasised and elaborated but at the same time it is asserted that He cannot correctly be compared to any worldly equal and there is no competent vocabulary to define him in toto. In short we may say that as the worldly, human body is incapable of to thoroughly perceive Allah, as the human mind, as it is, is utterly defunct to realise the full significance of His powerful existence, similarly the human language and the words, as employed by human beings in general in all the languages and in all parts of the world, are too narrow to define the fullest sense of the term Allah. Here we may draw an analogy to explain this point further from the terminology of the Sufistic literature. It is claimed by the Sufis that 'One cannot understand or know God. He can only be realised and that too if the inner eye is open. The inner eye is only in that case open when the outer eye is shut! One poet has very well interpreted this idea in this simple Urdu verse : Jis pe khul jata hai raz-i-Haq Nihan; Band hojati hai bas uski zaban that is when the secret about Haqq or Truth (the Reality) dawns upon anyone the sure sign of this is that he becomes speechless. That is when the Sufi through his gnostic experiences realises the truth about God he simply becomes soetranced in his discovery that he is lost to the world. Thus it may be concluded that to discuss about such a delicate point is

useless. Here we find that a Mu'tazilah and a Sufi belong just to two different directly opposite schools of thought and it is still more surprising that both these schools at one time or the other drank from the same well of Greek knowledge yet a day came when they became so wide apart and contrary to each other. The primary object of both of these schools of thought was to study the truth about God and Godhead, but in their investigations they became so diversified that they became poles apart and it appears that as both of them are so different from each other therefore only one can be on the right path while the other is misguided.

Now before giving further hair-splitting details about the later development of this school of thought and its main principles and ideologies let us for a while consider the brief history of its origin and early development; the main Mu'tazilah thinker of different periods and their chief contributions to the dogmas and doctrines of the creed; the influence exerted by the Mu'tazilahs on other contemporary schools of thought and sects who have freely borrowed from this progressive school of thought having queer ideologies and principles.

The origin of this sect is traced so far back as the days of Hasan of Basra (d. 728 A.C.) who was a very learned soul of his age. Once some of the Kharijites and Murjites came to him seeking his expert opinion on the question of human actions and the consequences which do follow here after. The crucial problem was whether a person who commits mortal sin be still a Muslim and will enter Heaven or he becomes an infidel as soon as he is guilty of such a misdeed. As this was a very vital point and to give an opinion on the same offhand was not desirable hence Hasan Basri began to ponder over it and did not give any prompt answer. It was adjudicated by the Kharijites that since a man is responsible for his actions and he must act according to the strict Islamic law and should not commit a sin, therefore any one guilty of any such act is not a Muslim and will not enter Heaven; while the Murjites pleaded that we here in this world cannot adjudicate human actions and it is for God Himslef on the day of judgement to pronounce reward or punishment for human actions therefore we should not pass any definite opinion about anything and should postpone the matter for that day and wait patiently without criticising any body for his actions whether good or bad. Both were right according to the ideology of each and both points of view were correct and logical but Hasan was trying to find out a *via media* which may be both convincing and at the same time just. Before he could utter his judgement, one of his disciples Wasil bin 'Ata gathered some of his adherents

and began to discuss and pass judgement on this problem. When Hasan noticed this he naturally did not like the idea and simply observed «I'tazala 'Anna» that is - he (Wasil bin 'Ata), has seceded from us. From this day this group of the seceders, or Mu'tazilites as they were called, grouped themselves into a separate sect and built up a distinct school of thought for themselves as referred to above.

These Mu'tazilites have been described as people of learning and thoughtful meditation and therefore they have contributed a mass of literature in this direction particularly when they seized with avidity on the books of the philosophers and their devoted study of Philosophy and metaphysics evoked many interesting questions and discussions which later on were incorporated into voluminous and bulky books of Islamic sectarian theology. The result of this cultivation of deep interest in matters logical led to a conflict of ideas. There was one school of thought which applied reason to the study of the Quran while there was another group of people who were called the Orthodox believers and they upheld unquestioning acceptance of the Kalam, the holy speech of Allah, as it stood. These latter put faith above reason while the former put reason above faith. In the Quran itself there is nothing definite in this respect that what is the form of Almighty God. It is admitted no doubt that the world has an Originator, prior, powerful, knowing, able to contrive according to His will, who is neither body nor attribute nor substance but a single essence ('ayn) not to be perceived by the senses, and who is just and wise, one who would do no evil nor will it. They declared that the Quranic attributes of Allah were non-entities and that they were indistinguishable bound up with His 'essence'.

If we take certain verses of the Quran they are so indefinite that no clear conclusion may be drawn out of them - for example: God may lead a person astray and he may guide him also - or He is free to reward or punish any body as He desires. If these things are admitted that it is for God to decide whether he punishes one and rewards another simply according to his own sweet will then why there are good and bad actions and Heaven and Hell. If every thing is predestined or it may be decided by God according to His own choice without any definite plan or pre-arranged programme then how could one be on the right path while the other one is misguided. This therefore does not appeal to reasoning and it is why these free-thinkers of Islam who based their conclusion on a more definite and concrete reasoning were of opinion that there is no doubt every thing is set according to a well-planned scheme. God is all

Powerful and He can do what He desires but He has laid down certain rules for the conduct of human actions - and as there is always good while God himself is Love and Good Himself therefore if any evil is to be found it is due to the misguided will of man and he is solely responsible for it. It is why there is so much misery in this world which is one to intact that people do not lead a chaste and virtuous life. Laws of Nature are simple and pure. What ever evil is to be found in this world it is due to lack of good. Man is free to do what he likes - he has only been guided to do good and the absence of good is evil. Therefore the evil is not created by God and if a person is guilty of some evil he misbehaves and must be punished to that extent by God or Laws of Nature. It is quite evident too. If you do contrary to a simple rule of say drinking pure water and instead of that drink polluted or poisoned water the result will be some disease of the body - similarly if a person does not behave in a way which behoves of him he is sure to suffer on that count. Now if we find that this thing is appreciated in our days too it is due to the influence exerted by this moderate and progressive school of thought called Mutazilites. Formerly people used to believe if any evil or misfortune used to befall to them it was so because it was destined but now they laugh over the absurdity of this attitude for their life. Thus we find that these progressive schools of thought have contributed a good deal towards the human progress in the realm of reasoning and thinking.

The main points raised by Nazzam in this connection were three; first he tried to reject the theory of dualism that there is one power of good and another of evil - because this was opposed to the theory of Unity of God; next he established that God has created only good and if any evil occurs then man himself is responsible for the same. The third point raised by him was that One must question the well established and classical beliefs because the essence of advancement is criticism and debate. His method of questioning and answering has been considered to be a very progressive one and his dictum in this connection was that 'Doubt' is the first absolute requirement of knowledge. Now giving up other issues involved in this problem let us enumerate certain important thinkers of the Mutazilah doctrine and the influence they exerted.

They were as follows :

1. Wasil bin 'Ata (q-v) His main contribution was about the Creation of the Quran and also the eternal wisdom of God: His words are 'If

we admit of any such thing that there is an eternal being or quality besides God, it means we affirm that there are two gods.'

2. Abu-l-Huzayl al-'Allāf - He belonged to the second generation of Mutazilites. He lived at a time when Greek philosophy was being studied with great ardour and was received without question. He admits the attributes of God and regards them as eternal but believes them to be not external things possessed by God but modes or phases of the divine essence. His period was about 840 A.C.

3. Ibrahīm bin Sayr an-Nazzām (d. 845 A.C.) (q.v.) His theories have been cited above.

4. Bishr bin Mu'tamir (d. 840 circa) His main argument was that man has to exercise his free-will and therefore infants cannot be condemned to eternal punishment because they have no responsibility having never exercised free will.

5. Ma'mar bin 'Abbad al-Sulmani (d. 835 A.C.) describes God as creating substances and not accidents. He further treats the attributes of God as to be purely negative, so that God is unknowable by man. He is definitely according to him, infinite or unlimited in space or eternal and unlimited in time. In other words he may be called pantheistic in his mode of thought and his pantheism was further developed by.

6. Tumameh bin Ashras (d. 828 A.C.) who treats the world as created by God but according to the law of nature and not due to an act of volition.

Reverting to Nazzam we may say that his teachings were further developed by his pupils like Ahmad bin Habit, Fadl al-Hudabi, and 'Amr bin Bakr al-Jahir. The last of the three al-Jahir (d. 868 A.C.) has opined that a true Muslim must believe in a God without a form or body since the attribution of a form to God is the way of the idolators. Substance he treated as eternal and accidents as created and variable.

The later development of the Mu'tazilah doctrine was a more confined system of ideologies and dogmas which were concentrated and developed mostly at Basra instead of Baghdad as at the latter place purely philosophical discussions had been in vogue.

At Basra the first name comes of al-Jubai (d. 915 A.C.) the preceptor of the famous Ash'ari leader, Abul Hasan Ash'ari, who once was a very staunch supporter of the cause of the Mutazilites but after some

time being convinced of the futility of this system gave it up openly and renouncing the Mu'tazilah doctrine started a new school of thought called the Ash'ari doctrine which is the back bone of the present day sunnie or orthodox dogma of modern age. As a matter of fact the present belief of an ordinary Muslim is much based on the principles laid down by the Ash'ari School of thought and in a way it was itself much indebted to the Mu'tazilah doctrine. Thus we may conclude that the modern free thinker of today is in great gratitude to the Mu'tazilah doctrine which for the first time in Islam introduced the logical thinking and prompted people to be more reasonable in their belief of God and other dogmas pertaining to religion. To conclude this paper I may add one more sentence, and it is that Islam is a very progressive or flexible religion and anything which comes obsolete or stereotyped automatically goes out of its circles so that sothet even the doctrine of the Mu'tazilites one day became out of date and it had to give place to other progressive and more advanced ideas.

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